FFR

Issue № 171: When your phone wants to open a joint account

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition—an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart—it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."

--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

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If this magazine does not meet your expectations,
please return it to us in its original condition
for a full refund, minus the cost of enlightenment.

Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded) To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft** (or **Culinary Construct**): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, "China Wok Habitue," suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it's more likely a testament to the local takeout joint's generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid

HOLLYWOOD
HOLLYWOOD

The Gilded Bagel

By Fabian Armands Adamík

Okay, settle in, adjust your metaphorical fedora to a suitably ironic angle, and prepare for the low-wattage glow of West Hollywood, circa Nineteen Fifty-Something, where the smog lay thick as thieves and dreams went to die, usually by asphyxiation under a pile of unpaid bills.

Our protagonist, if such a grandiloquent term can be applied to a man whose primary contribution to the arts resembled a particularly unfortunate Rorschach test executed in volatile spirits, was Dime Store Hubley. He wasn't *named* Dime Store, you understand; the moniker adhered to him like cheap cologne after a fraught encounter with a display of his namesake's "Atomic Disintegrators" during a brief, ill-advised foray into prop acquisition. Hubley, a man whose ambition perpetually outpaced his collateral, operated from the sticky Naugahyde booth of 'The Chromatic Spoon', a diner where the coffee tasted suspiciously of existential dread and yesterday's onions.

His grand project, the culmination of... well, whatever it was Hubley culminated, was a zine. Not merely a zine, mind you. This was to be *The Gilded Bagel & Tinseltown Tattler*, a periodical poised, in Hubley's nicotine-stained imagination, somewhere between the scabrous industry whispers of *Variety* and the arch, eyebrow-cocked ennui of *The New Yorker*. Its pages, stencilled onto defiant paper stock via a wheezing, ink-spattered mimeograph machine liberated from a defunct correspondence school, contained multitudes. Or rather, it contained the singular, perplexing narrative of Daphne, the Pug-faced Butterfly, whose fluttering, snub-nosed campaign against the studio system formed the central, baffling allegory. Interspersed were koans from one Hiram the Elder, a genuine article – a desiccated sage who held court near the La Brea Tar Pits, dispensing gnomic wisdom inscribed onto fossilized bagels he'd painstakingly gilded. ("The hole," one such bagel proclaimed, "is merely potential waiting for jam.")

Hubley, possessing the organisational skills of a startled squirrel, required minions. He found them clinging precariously to the lower rungs of Poverty Row, actors whose brief candle flickered brightest sometime during the Harding administration or whose faces were permanently etched with the haunted look of someone perpetually waiting for a call-back that wasn't coming. There was Rex Splendid, a former matinee idol whose profile now suggested a topographical map of disappointment; Mitzi LaRue, a silent starlet who communicated primarily through exaggerated gasps and the occasional, unnerving subtitle card she kept handy; and 'Fingers' Finnegan, typecast eternally as Shifty Henchman #2.

Their task: the sacred rite of mimeographing and distribution. The air in Hubley's cramped bungalow court apartment thickened with the fumes of duplicating fluid, a scent that mingled uneasily with Rex's bay rum and Mitzi's lingering gardenia. Fingers, surprisingly dextrous, collated pages while Rex practised dramatic poses for potential newsstand vendors and Mitzi silently critiqued the kerning with tragic hand gestures. Distribution involved stuffing copies under the windshield wipers of DeSotos and Studebakers parked near studio gates, a task performed with the furtive urgency of saboteurs, often under the jaundiced neon glare of liquor store signs.

One smog-choked afternoon, seeking guidance (or perhaps just a free, albeit petrified, breakfast), Hubley consulted Hiram the Elder. The sage, adjusting his spectacles, peered at a smudged copy of the Tattler. "The pug," Hiram intoned, carefully selecting a particularly dense bagel, "lacks narrative propulsion. And your lacquer technique on these bagels? Friable. Utterly friable. Consider shellac, my boy. And perhaps," he added, gesturing vaguely towards the tar pits, "a touch less lepidopteran angst, a jot more... primordial ooze?"

It was during one such clandestine distribution run near Schwabs that Hubley kept encountering Cassandra. Cassandra was... distinct. She possessed eyes that seemed to comprehend the cosmic joke underlying Hubley's entire enterprise, a certain quiet composure, and a faint, meticulously sewn line tracing her upper lip, a relic of some past misfortune worn not as a scar but as a subtle, enigmatic sigil. Perched eternally on her

shoulder was Mr. Finks, a capuchin monkey of unnerving intelligence who wore a tiny fez and possessed an unnerving knack for pilfering stray sugar packets.

Cassandra, it turned out, frequented The Chromatic Spoon, observing Hubley's frantic operations with a mixture of detached amusement and something akin to anthropological curiosity. She never offered direct assistance, but sometimes, Mr. Finks, under her quiet direction, would expertly place a copy of the *Tattler* onto the lap of a sleeping producer or use one as an impromptu napkin, achieving a distribution vector Hubley could only dream of.

"The butterfly," Cassandra murmured one evening, stirring her lukewarm coffee while Mr. Finks meticulously groomed his fez, "she seems awfully cross for a creature with wings."

Hubley, flustered, launched into a convoluted defence involving symbolism and the inherent tragedy of the Hollywood casting couch, but trailed off under her steady gaze.

"Perhaps," she suggested, the sewn line barely disturbing the word, "she simply needs a decent agent. Or a net." Mr. Finks chittered in agreement.

And so, Dime Store Hubley soldiered on, fuelled by diner coffee and Hiram's fossilized aphorisms, his mimeograph machine wheezing defiance against the indifferent West Hollywood night. His zine, a bizarre fusion of high-flown pretension and low-rent execution, fluttered briefly in the rag-top breeze before inevitably finding its way to the gutter, perhaps glanced at by Cassandra, perhaps used by Mr. Finks for purposes best left unexplored, another footnote in the sprawling, inscrutable epic of trying, and mostly failing, under the relentless California sun. The Gilded Bagel remained, much like its creator, resolutely ungilded.

The Pug, the Hen, and the Philosophical Fricassee: A Nietzschean Vaudeville in Three Acts (With a Squirrel Encore)

By Eleonore Lilo Haase

Scene: A dimly lit chamber in the Engadin Valley, 1884. The air smells of pine resin, ink, and existential dread. Friedrich Nietzsche, draped in a velvet dressing gown of dubious provenance, stands before a chalkboard scrawled with aphorisms in High German and doodles of eagles pecking snakes. Three students—a tubercular poet from Leipzig, a skeptical theologian from Tübingen, and a Prussian junker with a monocle and a faint odor of schnapps—sit at a wobbly oak table, clutching notebooks made from recycled Wagner librettos. A taxidermized owl watches judgmentally from a shelf. The room's sole window frames a vista of Alpine peaks, which, if one squints, resemble the jagged teeth of Zarathustra's camel.

Nietzsche (stroking his mustache, which, unbeknownst to all, is a small, highly disciplined squirrel named Schopenhauer): "Meine Herren, you have come seeking enlightenment, yes? To sip from the frothy chalice of my Übermensch metaphysics? Ach, very well. But first, a parable! A Gleichnis! A tale of poultry and pugilism, of clucks and chaos—a fricassee for the soul!" (He claps twice. A moth-eaten curtain parts to reveal a miniature proscenium arch, behind which stand GRETA, a hen of Teutonic precision, and DAPHNE, a pug-faced butterfly with the wingspan of a teacup and the demeanor of a caffeinated anarchist.)

Greta (adjusting a tiny pince-nez affixed to her beak with beeswax): "Guten Tag. I am Greta. My existence is a syllogism. My eggs are ovoid axioms. I cluck, therefore I am."

Daphne (fluttering in a drunken helix, her pug-face contorted into a leer that suggests she has just read the Genealogy of Morals backwards): "Bzzz-woof! Dasein is a joke! The abyss giggles! Also, I ate Zarathustra's lunch."
Nietzsche (to the students, sotto voce): "Observe! Greta embodies the Apollonian ideal—Ordnung, Klarheit, the tyranny of the ding an sich. She is Kant with feathers. A walking categorical imperative. Now, Daphne—" (he pauses, wiping a tear of paternal pride) "—Daphne is my Dionysian darling. A maenad in moth wings! Chaos in a chrysalis! She is the will to power... if the will to power had a snout and a penchant for schnitzel."

The Junker (scribbling furiously): "Herr Professor, is this... philosophy? Or have we mistakenly wandered into a Kaffeehaus pantomime?"

Nietzsche (ignoring him, brandishing a conductor's baton stolen from Wagner's grave): "Ruhe, bitte! The drama begins! Act I: Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Hühner! Greta, if you please—demonstrate the eternal recurrence... of breakfast."

Greta marches to stage left in metronomic strides, pecking at a grid of millet arranged in a Fibonacci sequence. Daphne dive-bombs her, scattering the grains into a Pollockian splatter. Greta emits a scandalized "Gluck-gluck-GLÜCK!" and attempts to recalibrate her peck-trajectory, but Daphne now orbits her head, buzzing a deranged aria from Tristan und Isolde in 7/8 time.

The Poet (clutching his chest): "Mein Gott... it's like watching Schiller's Ode to Joy devoured by a rabid accordion!"

Nietzsche (grinning like a man who has just set fire to a dictionary): "Jawohl! The Apollonian order cannot hold! The hen's neat universe unravels—grain by grain, cluck by cluck—as the pug-butterfly's Rausch consumes all! Behold: the death of morality... as interpreted by poultry!"

Daphne lands atop Greta's head, her wings flapping a gale of existential vertigo. Greta spins, faster, faster—a feathery dervish—until, with a final cry of "Die Wahrheit ist ein Huhn!" she collapses into a heap of molted Platonic ideals.

The Theologian (horrified): "But... but Herr Nietzsche—if Dionysus triumphs, what becomes of meaning? Of morality?"

Nietzsche (plucking Schopenhauer from his upper lip and dangling the squirrel by its tail): "Meaning? Moral? Pfui! Meaning is a crutch for bipeds who fear the tango of the abyss! The universe is a joke—a Witz scribbled in disappearing ink! And as for morality..." (he tosses the squirrel onto the table, where it begins nibbling the theologian's lecture notes) "...it is but the id of a hen who fears the pug's grin!"

Daphne (now perched on Greta's inert form, her wings forming a grotesque halo): "Bzzz-WOOF! Alles ist erlaubt! Now, who's for brunch?"

The students sit in stunned silence. The junker, ever practical, pours himself a third schnapps. The poet weeps into his cravat. The theologian stares at his squirrel-gnawed manuscript, murmuring, "Es ist nicht fair... es ist nicht fair..."

Nietzsche (suddenly solemn, his eyes reflecting the cold fire of the Übermensch): "You see now, meine Kinder? Life is neither Apollonian nor Dionysian. It is... buffoonery. A vaudeville staged by a deaf, blind, and mildly sadistic playwright. And we? We are but walkers-on, tripping over our own hubris, clutching our Birth of Tragedy like security blankets—"

He pauses. A low, ominous hum fills the room. The taxidermized owl's head rotates 180 degrees. Schopenhauer the squirrel begins playing Flight of the Valkyries on a miniature tuba strapped to its torso. The chalkboard erupts into equations that prove, irrefutably, that $2 + 2 = \infty$. The Alps outside the window dissolve into a Jackson Pollock canvas.

Nietzsche (yanking a lever hidden in his robe; the floor vanishes, plunging everyone into a void filled with laughing stars): "—AND NOW, GENTLEMEN, THE INTERMISSION! SQUIRREL!"

The universe blinks. Reboots. The students awaken in a Bavarian beer garden, arguing about whether it all "really happened." Nietzsche, now a minor character in a Kafka novel, sells pretzels nearby. Greta and Daphne tour Weimar as an avant-garde cabaret act. Schopenhauer the squirrel becomes Chancellor of Germany. The End.

Eyes and Ears

By Kyle Anderson

The Snoezelen room, designed to soothe, pulsed with a dim, ambient light. Arthur, ten, woke first. The projector's lens, a dark, expectant eye, drew him. He flicked the switch.

Black and white figures flickered on the padded wall: Abbott and Costello, their voices echoing, "Slowly I turn..." Celeste, eight, her fingers tracing the turntable's edge, set the needle down. Scatterbrain's thrash metal exploded, "Don't call me dude!"

The video shifted. A cartoon butterfly with a pug's face flitted across the wall. "Don't call me Sparky! Call me Daphne!" it barked, a high-pitched whine.

Sal, the night guard, found them. He saw the flicker of the projector, heard the metal scream. His own son was on the spectrum, and he knew these moments of intense, isolated experience. He just saw two kids, in a space they found interesting.

He gently took Arthur and Celeste's hands. "Let's get you home," he said, his voice low.

He called Dolores. They met at McDonald's, the fluorescent lights harsh against their tired faces. Dolores, a social worker, knew the families. She had seen the strain, the quiet desperation.

"Arthur's mom works late," Dolores said, sipping her lukewarm coffee. "Celeste's dad...he struggles."

They drove in Sal's Crown Victoria, the city lights blurring. Arthur hummed along to a rhythm only he could hear, Celeste watched the passing streetlights, her eyes wide. Dolores spoke softly to the children, her voice a soothing balm.

At Arthur's apartment, a single light burned in the window. His mother, her face etched with exhaustion, hugged him tightly. "Thank you," she whispered.

Celeste's father, his eyes red, waited on the porch. He held her close, his hand trembling. "She gets lost sometimes," he said, his voice thick.

Sal and Dolores drove home, the silence in the car heavy. The night felt less strange now, more human. The Snoezelen room, the thrash metal, the pug-butterfly—it was all just part of the messy, unpredictable fabric of their lives. A tuesday night in Long Island.

Vermeer in Miniature

By Ry Southgate

A suburban street whispers,

not of empires, nor gilded frames,

but a chipped green box,

a dollhouse for discarded dreams,

and tiny rebellions.

She stoops,

sunlight catching the strawberry bow

on her hair,

a serious face examining

the small, papered world within.

Past landscapes no wider than her palm,

portraits peering from cardboard easels,

her fingers, blunt and sure,

find it:

The Girl with the Wine Glass,

Vermeer's cool light distilled

to a rectangle the size of her hand.

Not the woman's satin,

nor the men's shadowed intent,

but the tablecloth's blue,

that impossible blue,

arrests her.

She holds her rubber axolotl,

its plastic grin a stark counterpoint

to the Dutch master's quietude.

A trade is proposed,

in the language of five-year-olds:

the bright, squishy amphibian

for a moment of serene adulthood.

You watch,

a smile you hide

behind a feigned cough.

The transaction made,

a paperweight from a Seattle gift shop

slips into the axolotl's place –

a silent counteroffer

to the universe.

Later,

tucked in her bed,

the rubber creature

absorbs the warmth of her small hand,

its silent vigil

a secret held

between a girl

and a long-dead painter's gaze.

It Started, as These Things Often Do, With Impeccable Lighting

By Hanna "Henna" Hannaford

Look, life on Tanna had its rhythms. Yam harvests. The occasional seismic shudder from Mount Yasur. Debates about whether Chief Isaac's pig was, in fact, descended from divinity or just genuinely quite large. Then Beverly arrived.

Beverly was from... well, she said "Connecticut," which to us sounded like a particularly aggressive type of throat infection. She was writing a thesis, she explained, on "Post-Colonial Narratives and Indigenous Resilience," and she carried with her a solar-powered television the size of a medium-sized breadfruit. We mostly used it to watch the blurry broadcasts about competitive lawn bowls she somehow picked up from Australia, which were soothing in their sheer pointlessness.
Then came the Tom Ford ad.

One doesn't see a Tom Ford ad. One is assaulted by its aggressively chic sensibilities. On Beverly's somewhat flickering screen, it was less an advertisement and more a brief, confusing portal into another dimension. There was skin – so much skin, glistening as if perpetually emerging from a lukewarm baptismal font filled with virgin olive oil. There were cheekbones that could slice taro. There were lips the color of sunsets no one on Tanna had ever witnessed, probably because they required a specific Instagram filter and a looming sense of existential dread to achieve. And there was a man, presumably Tom Ford himself, looking like he'd personally invented both brooding and thread counts higher than 800.

"What," murmured Nako, who had hitherto believed the height of personal adornment was a well-placed hibiscus flower, "in the name of the seasons... is that?"

Beverly, mid-sip of lukewarm instant coffee, offered, "Oh, that? Tom Ford Makeup. Very...aspirational."

Aspirational. The word hung in the humid air, thicker than the smoke from the cooking fires. We Tannese are not without aspiration. We aspire to strong yams, many pigs, and perhaps, on a really ambitious day, figuring out what Wi-Fi actually is. But this...this was different. This was aspiration you could smear on your face.

The ad showed people transforming. Not into birds or ancestors, our usual go-to transformations, but into beings of impossible glossiness. Beings who looked like they never had to worry about volcanic ash dulling their complexion or whether the next cyclone would take the roof off the *nakamal*.

Chief Isaac, a man whose face bore the dignified roadmap of seventy years under the Vanuatu sun, pointed a calloused finger at a woman with eyelids that shimmered like captured rainbows. "This...'Tom Ford'...it gives power?"

Beverly stammered, "Well, it's more about... perceived power? Confidence? Commanding a room when you enter it, I guess."

Commanding a room. We understood that. Usually it involved a well-aimed speech and possibly the subtle brandishing of a ceremonial club. But this... this you applied with a tiny brush.

And so began Project Éclat. That's what Beverly called it, after we described our mission. She said it was French for "burst of brilliance," which sounded about right. We pooled resources. Kava roots were traded. Prize roosters were earmarked. Old Man Tavki even offered his prized collection of WWII-era Coca-Cola bottles, convinced their vintage allure held transferable value. Beverly, bemused and slightly horrified, helped us navigate this thing called the "internet," her tiny screen connecting us to vast networks of... well, Tom Ford retailers.

The first shipment arrived via a sputtering supply plane. Unboxing it was a ceremony in itself. Oud Wood. Tobacco Vanille. Boys & Girls Lip Color in shades like "Chadwick" and "Kaia." It smelled like... ambition. And a frankly alarming amount of money.

We applied it. Oh, how we applied it. Young men, prepping for the *nekowiar* ceremony, swapped their usual pig grease paints for streaks of Traceless Soft Matte Foundation. Not because it made them better dancers, but because the sheer audacity of wearing something called "Soft Matte" while stomping bare-chested in the dirt felt like a power move. Elder women, their faces already canvases of rich stories, dabbed Shimmering Body Oil onto their shoulders, not to attract mates, but because the subtle glint reminded them of the morning sun on the caldera.

We tried selling it. This part was less successful. Tourists, mostly Australians looking for "authentic experiences," were baffled to be offered Tom Ford Bronzing Gel next to woven baskets. "Is this...is this real?" one sunburnt woman asked, poking suspiciously at a bottle of Neroli Portofino as if it might suddenly demand her credit card details.

We weren't making money. The makeup, under the intense tropical sun and humidity, had a tendency to migrate in ways Tom Ford's dermatological team probably hadn't anticipated. Little Timmy accidentally ingested some Lost Cherry lip balm and spent an afternoon convinced he could talk to breadfruit.

Beverly started writing frantic emails to her advisor about "unforeseen cultural syncretism" and "the hegemonic metastasis of luxury branding." She kept using the word "problematic."

We just thought Chadwick was a really excellent shade of nude.

Then came the twist. Which, in retrospect, maybe wasn't that much of a twist to us. One day, a representative from Tom Ford Beauty actually showed up. Mr. Abernathy.

He wore a suit so exquisitely tailored it seemed to repel humidity through sheer force of will. He'd heard whispers, seen Beverly's increasingly panicked blog posts. He came

expecting... well, he probably didn't know what to expect. He certainly didn't expect Chief Isaac, his noble face flawlessly contoured with Shade and Illuminate (we found it really brought out his authoritative jawline), presiding over a yam distribution ceremony.

Mr. Abernathy watched, slack-jawed, as Nako, wearing Eye Color Quad in "Honeymoon" with surprising artistry, solemnly presented a yam the size of a small dog to another villager whose lips were boldly painted with "Scarlet Rouge." There was no money exchanged. No sales pitch.

"What...what's happening?" Mr. Abernathy finally managed, dabbing his brow with a linen handkerchief.

Chief Isaac beamed, his bronzed cheekbones catching the light. "We share," he said simply. He gestured to the assembled villagers, their faces variously adorned. "Tom Ford. It makes the yams...feel special."

And here it was, laid bare: We hadn't misunderstood the ad at all. We just applied its principles laterally. The ad promised transformation, status, a feeling of elevated worth. We hadn't tried to become the glossy people in the ad. We'd simply recognized that intrinsic value could be imbued, and we'd chosen to imbue it upon our yams.

Our prize yams, already symbols of hard work and prosperity, were now also...glamorous. They were aspirational yams. Yams with self-esteem. We weren't selling makeup. We were elevating root vegetables to objets d'art via high-end cosmetics. The makeup wasn't the commodity; it was the ritualistic blessing.

Mr. Abernathy's left eye began to twitch. "So you're...you're not generating any...revenue?"

Nako frowned. "The yams are very robust this season. Is that not revenue?"

Beverly just sighed and started taking notes. Her thesis was getting really weird, but also, probably, an automatic A.

Tom Ford Beauty pulled out of Vanuatu shortly thereafter, citing “insurmountable logistical and philosophical discrepancies.” We still occasionally get CARE packages from Beverly, sometimes containing slightly damaged Tom Ford products she gets at discount. We use them sparingly. Only for the very best yams. After all, true luxury isn't about consumption. It’s about knowing your tuber is rocking better highlighter than you are. And on Tanna, that’s just how we glow.

The Squatty Odyssey:
A $20 Shoeshine Gonzo Quest

By Suzanne Ashley

Las Vegas is a simulation of itself,
mirrored neon looping in the brain like a GIF that won't die.
The Sphere hums, a behemoth LED godhead broadcasting
a colossal googly eye,
which blinks as I squat over the bamboo arch—
the squatty potty, four dollars on clearance,
still humming with the memory of some factory in Shenzhen.

Hotel towel draped over my shoulder like a prophet's sash,
I shake the Dollar Tree can of shoe polish like a maraca,
rattle-rattle-rattle, incantation to the grand poo-bah potentates of hustle.
"Twenty buck shines," I announce
to the stream of gamblers, influencers, lost conventioneers.
A high roller in snakeskin boots stops,
tosses me a twenty without waiting for the shine.
This is America.

By midnight, I count my spoils:
sixty-four dollars, a drink voucher,
two business cards (one probably fake).

Greyhound eastward—elbows crushed against a woman
who sells blessed water from a Brooklyn bathtub.
She smells like lavender and unpaid rent.

New York at dawn—concrete wet like it's sweating.

I climb the tree in Prospect Park,
hammer nails into branches,
hang my needlepoint works on twine:
A stitched subway rat,
a portrait of Joan Didion with angel wings,
a single word, "Hustle," in calligraphic thread.

The publishers sip espresso beneath me.
I wait.
I network.
I plot the next grift.

The Light Inside the Aisle

By Wallace Franco

The woman was holding a package of emergency survival biscuits, tapping them against her palm like a deck of cards. "Taste like sawdust, but in a good way," she said. Her accent was Miami—warm vowels edged in steel. A Cuban or Dominican lilt, but smoothed over with years of elsewhere.

I adjusted the stack of space heaters by the register, shifting one so its box didn't teeter. "Depends on your definition of 'good.'"

She grinned. Sharp teeth, black-braided hair wrapped tight in a scarf patterned with bright oranges, a memory of heat against the Maine gray. "I used to eat them when we'd go out on the boat," she said. "Dad would buy the cheapest thing, tell us it was astronaut food."

A storm was coming. It was why people were here, stuffing carts with crank radios and thermal socks. The kind of storm where people lost power for days, where you suddenly understood the full weight of darkness.

She flicked the biscuits back onto the shelf and wandered toward the discount cookware, trailing her fingers over a row of cast-iron skillets like they were old lovers. "You don't sound like you're from here," she said, not looking at me.

"Toronto," I said. "Did animation for the National Film Board. Before—" I gestured at the fluorescent expanse of Ocean State Job Lot, where the intercom crackled with a half-dead holiday jingle.

She laughed, a quick, bright sound. "Before before?"

"Before the industry dried up. Before everything got cheaper and faster and no one wanted painted cells anymore." I shrugged. "Came here for a job, stayed for inertia."

She lifted a rolling pin, tested its weight. "I turned down Disney," she said. "Twice."

Something in her voice—a practiced casualness, like someone trying to pretend a wound didn't itch.

"Let me guess," I said. "They wanted your work, just not you?"

Her eyes flicked up, scanning me like a film reel running in reverse. A beat, then a slow nod. "Something like that."

A pause settled between us, the kind that feels heavier in a store where nothing costs more than twenty bucks.

She picked up a stainless steel pot and studied her reflection in its convex surface. "I'm camping in Vancouver soon," she said. "Then London."

I rang up her items, punched the total into the register. "You say London. UK or Ontario?"

She smirked, but the look in her eyes wasn't amusement. "If I meant Ontario, I'd say Ontario."

Fair enough.

I wanted to ask about London. About what kind of work she did. Instead, I scanned her items—emergency matches, a bag of dried mango, a wool blanket. She slid a crumpled twenty across the counter.

As she left, she pulled her scarf tighter, bracing against the cold. Through the glass doors, I saw her step into a silver sedan with Florida plates, a parking ticket tucked under the wiper.

When she pulled away, I imagined her somewhere warmer. Neon light on wet pavement. A high-rise window open to the salt air. A sketchbook spread across a hotel desk, pages fluttering as the AC clicked on.

Good4U and the Subterranean Hungarian Contrarian Schematics: A Buda-Pest Fugue in Minor Keys

By Petronella Bözsi Nyitrai

The once-vaunted Good4U, a Pest edifice to the quickly-soured aspirations of clean eating, now stood as a mausoleum for forgotten resolutions, the very air thick with the dust of dreams gone rancid, the faint, almost spectral aroma of decay clinging to the skeletal frameworks of what were once displays brimming with virtuous grains. And through this purgatorial space, where the light filtering from the eternally grimed windows performed a morbid dance with airborne detritus, moved Dr. Ilona Varga, a figure etched with the indelible lines of human frailty and the crushing weight of existence itself. Her oversized surgical gloves, a permanent reminder of a youthful, ill-conceived experiment with bio-engineered pockets – an anecdote best left unspooled under the distorting influence of strong spirits, involving reckless scientists and an unexpectedly delightful calzone – flapped around her hands like flags of surrender. Doomed from birth to the singular torment of congenital apocketia, a biological slight she interpreted as a personal affront from the indifferent machinery of evolution, she carried her instruments of trade precariously tucked into her waistband, a habit which had, on more occasions than one, resulted in the abrupt and unwelcome sensation of self-administered acupuncture. On a dusty shelf, amidst the forlorn remnants of kale chips, sat a discarded stuffed animal: a butterfly with the unmistakably mournful visage of a pug. Ilona paused, her gaze falling upon this bizarre creation.

"This place," she rasped, the sound a dry whisper mirroring the desolate sigh of wind through crumbling masonry – Pest masonry, of course, far more abrasive and unforgiving than its self-consciously refined Buda counterpart – "reeks of evaporated hope and the

lingering tang of desperation, a scent reminiscent of Mondays within the hollow chambers of the National Assembly." She picked up the pug-faced butterfly. "Tell me, little beast," she murmured, her voice taking on a Dostoevskian lament, "do you too feel the crushing weight of unfulfilled potential? Are you also haunted by the specter of what might have been, had you only been born a true butterfly, soaring on gossamer wings, or a proper pug, snuffling contentedly in the sun, rather than this... this grotesque fusion of yearning and despair? Perhaps," she added with a touch of absurdity, "you simply identify as bi-species. It's the fashionable thing these days, I understand." She placed the toy back on the shelf with a sigh. "Such is the human condition, is it not?" she continued to the empty air, her tone shifting to ponderous pronouncements. "To strive, to yearn, to create even in the face of the absurd, knowing full well that all our efforts will ultimately dissolve into the indifferent maw of time. Much like this... Good4U."

She drifted within the stagnant pool of her chosen solitude, a self-imposed exile born of a recent, lamentable entanglement involving a misplaced organ and a legal professional of unnerving persuasiveness. Budapest, that sprawling, magnificent beast of scalding thermal waters and ruinous revelry, a city oscillating between the stolid pronouncements of the Buda hills and the fevered pulse of the Pest flats, now appeared to her as an elaborate, unending medical drama, all gleaming surfaces masking the inevitability of decline. Then, amidst this refuse of discarded nutritional dogma, her eye, sharp and discerning despite the pervasive gloom, snagged on a family-sized container of whey protein, its label peeling away like sunburnt flesh, screaming in aggressively cheerful letters: "Good4U: Ultimate Strength." A jest, she thought, a cruel irony given the pitiable fragility of human will when confronted with the sublime temptation of a Dobos torte. She noticed the pug-faced butterfly again, its vacant eyes seemingly staring into the abyss.

"Good4U," she murmured, the syllables laced with a Pest-bred cynicism that Buda would undoubtedly deem vulgar. "More like... Good riddance." She addressed the toy again. "Ultimate strength, it says. I once tried to lift a mood. Heavy. Very heavy. You wouldn't believe."

With a swift, almost dismissive gesture of a gloved hand, she forced open the lid. Anticipating the familiar chalky white dust of futile ambition, she found instead neatly folded papers, their edges softened to the color of ancient secrets, hinting at stories whispered across the chasm of decades. Unfurling them with the delicate precision of a surgeon excising a particularly entrenched malignancy, she revealed the frantic, chaotic yet undeniably ordered lines of intricate blueprints. A subterranean cartography of Pest, a descent into the city's underbelly far removed from the relentless clang of trams and the hurried footfalls on the surface, these pathways snaked like forgotten veins beneath the skin of the metropolis, connecting the Good4U to an improbable constellation of landmarks: the revered halls of the National Museum, a repository of Hungary's often-questionable glories; the opulent spectacle of the Opera House, its soaring melodies a fragile mask for the backstage dramas as complex as the tunnels themselves; and, most disconcertingly, the arrivals terminal of Antalya Airport, a destination more readily associated with the fleeting pleasures of package holidays and the agony of sunburnt skin than with clandestine subterranean routes. She glanced at the pug-faced butterfly, as if seeking its opinion.

"Mi a fene...?" she breathed, the guttural sounds momentarily dragging her back to the harsh realities of her Csenger origins. Her gaze, unwavering and acute, traced the bewildering labyrinth of lines. "And you," she said to the toy, her voice tinged with angst, "what do you make of this tangled web? Is this not the very essence of our fractured existence, this incomprehensible design, this striving for meaning in a world utterly devoid of it?"

The annotations, rendered in an elegant, almost ghostly Hungarian script, intertwined with peculiar, unsettling symbols at crucial junctures within this subterranean labyrinth. One symbol, in particular, arrested her attention: a meticulously rendered depiction of a cow, its udder disturbingly accurate in its anatomical detail. A bovine flourish in this subterranean symphony of secrets? It defied any semblance of rational thought, and

Ilona, despite her recent fall from grace, had always clung to a grudging respect for the cold, unforgiving logic of the human form, even if the capricious whims of urban planning

operated under entirely different, incomprehensible laws. She held up the blueprints to the pug-faced butterfly.

Then, a voice, smooth as the richest Tokaji, yet with an undercurrent of something sharp and unsettling, echoed from the store's dusty recesses. "Looking for something, doctor?" Ilona spun around, her hand instinctively seeking the reassuring sharpness of a scalpel nestled against her hip. From the shadows emerged Ferenc, a figure seemingly lifted from the pages of a forgotten epoch. His tricorn hat, perched at a rakish angle atop a meticulously maintained mane of silver hair, cast a dramatic, theatrical shadow that stretched across the forgotten protein bars. He exuded an air of faded grandeur, the aura of a retired stage magician or perhaps a purveyor of illicit antiquities operating in the twilight of legality. He, too, noticed the toy.

"Just... Browse," she replied, her voice carefully masking the sudden surge of intrigue that now pulsed beneath her professional detachment. "Though I confess, the very notion of Browse within an establishment dedicated to the relics of bygone dietary manias eludes me."

Ferenc's eyes, the color of a storm-tossed Balaton, gleamed with an almost conspiratorial fervor. He picked up the pug-faced butterfly, turning it over in his hand. "Ah, but Doctor Varga, this is no mere repository of desiccated health fads. This," he said, "is a testament to the ephemerality of earthly concerns, is it not, this strange chimera? A fleeting fancy, soon to be relegated to the dusty corners of memory." He placed it back down. "This, my dear Ilona, is a threshold. A gateway, if you will, to... history itself. Or at the very least, a remarkably embellished rendition thereof."

"History?" Ilona's eyebrow arched with an ingrained skepticism honed over years of listening to patients' increasingly bizarre self-diagnoses. "Or perhaps a surprisingly well-preserved subterranean network of tunnels leading to an international airport?"

"Both, my dear doctor," Ferenc declared with a sweeping gesture that nearly toppled a precarious tower of gluten-free wafers. He paused, considering the pug-faced butterfly again. "And more. Infinitely more. Imagine: a secret history, whispering beneath the city's

clamor, a contrarian narrative to the official pronouncements that emanate, with such tiresome regularity, from the Buda side of the river."

From the very depths of the store, a low, resonant hum permeated the air, a sound that vibrated not just through the eardrums but deep within the very marrow of bone. Eszter, a woman whose intense concentration gave her the perpetual appearance of being on the precipice of unraveling the universe's most profound secrets, stood near a wall adorned with faded posters of unnervingly cheerful individuals extolling the virtues of wheatgrass.

Her face, illuminated by the sickly green glow of a malfunctioning emergency exit sign, was tilted upwards, her fingers tracing invisible patterns as if she were conducting a silent orchestra of subterranean energies. She glanced at the pug-faced butterfly, an almost imperceptible flicker of recognition in her intense gaze.

"And what, precisely," Ilona inquired, gesturing towards Eszter with a subtle inclination of her head, careful not to disturb the precarious equilibrium of her concealed instruments, "is that?"

"That, doctor," Ferenc whispered, his voice hushed with theatrical reverence, "is the very voice of history. The echoes of empires collapsing, the murmurs of forgotten battles fought in the very earth upon which we stand." Eszter approached, her eyes fixed on the pug-faced butterfly. "Or perhaps merely a particularly enthusiastic water pump," Ferenc continued, his tone shifting to Wright's dry understatement. "One can never be entirely certain with these matters."

Eszter picked up the toy, holding it delicately in her hands. "This creature," she said, "it embodies the very contradictions of existence. The delicate beauty of the butterfly wings juxtaposed with the earthly, almost vulgar features of the pug. Is this not our fate? To be forever torn between the ethereal and the mundane, the spiritual and the corporeal?" She sighed, a sound heavy with the weight of existential contemplation.
"And the cow?" Ilona pressed, her gloved finger pointing towards the stylized bovine symbol on the unfolded blueprints.

A small, wiry figure detached itself from behind an unstable mountain of dusty protein supplements. It was Áron, no older than six, yet possessing an unsettling air of self-assured competence. He balanced a surprisingly authentic-looking miniature mortar on his small shoulder, his grip surprisingly firm. He stopped, his gaze also drawn to the pug-faced butterfly in Eszter's hands.

"That's Cow," he announced, his voice a surprisingly deep baritone that seemed utterly divorced from his diminutive frame. "She knows the tunnels better than anyone. Even Ferenc sometimes loses his way, but Cow? Never." He reached out and gently poked the toy's pug nose. "Kinda weird looking, though."

"And what, precisely," Ilona asked, her voice a dangerously even tone, "is a six-year-old doing in possession of what appears to be a functional, albeit miniature, mortar?"

"Business," Áron stated with a grin that revealed the charming imperfection of a missing front tooth. "Soviet surplus. Excellent for... acquisitions. Besides," he added with a conspiratorial wink, "fireworks." He pointed the mortar at the pug-faced butterfly. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna blow up Pug-Fly here. Though, I gotta admit, the thought has crossed my mind. What is that thing anyway?"

As if summoned by his words, a large, placid bovine ambled into the dim light, its immense form seemingly oblivious to the chaotic clutter surrounding it. It was Cow, her eyes gentle and her demeanor utterly serene as she contentedly masticated on a stray bag of dried apricots that had somehow survived the relentless march of time. Cow nudged the discarded pug-faced butterfly with her nose, sniffing it curiously.

"And she... resides here?" Ilona asked, her voice now teetering on the precipice of outright disbelief.

"She finds the subterranean climate agreeable," Ferenc explained with an utterly straight face, adjusting his tricorn hat with an air of utter normalcy. "And she possesses an almost preternatural understanding of the city's intricate plumbing system. Essential knowledge for navigating the lower levels, you see. Buda, with its rigid, almost sterile infrastructure,

simply cannot compare to the organic, unpredictable chaos beneath Pest." He picked up the toy again. "You know," he said, his voice echoing Perelman, "this peculiar creature reminds me of a philosophical argument I once had with a taxidermist about the existential implications of combining a schnauzer with a lampshade. It went nowhere, naturally."

"Plumbing system?" Ilona repeated, the words feeling utterly inadequate to capture the sheer absurdity of the situation.

"It is a tale of considerable length and improbable detail," Áron interjected, deftly loading a miniature shell into the mortar with an unnerving display of practiced efficiency.

"Something involving a rogue badger, a misdirected consignment of paprika, and a remarkably insightful sewer worker named Béla. But time presses." He aimed the mortar playfully at the pug-faced butterfly again. "We have a heist to orchestrate."

"A heist?" Ilona's eyebrows shot upwards, momentarily eclipsing the memory of the scalpel tucked into her waistband. "What manner of heist?"

"The Ottoman miniatures," Ferenc declared, his eyes gleaming with an almost manic intensity. He held up the pug-faced butterfly. "These miniatures, my dear doctor, they represent a forgotten splendor, a whisper from a bygone era. Much like this... this poignant creature, a relic of some forgotten toy maker's whimsy." He sighed dramatically, a very heavy sigh. "Currently in transit through the soul-crushingly sterile confines of Antalya Airport. And we, my dear doctor, are to... acquire them."

"Acquire them?" Ilona echoed, the word leaving a metallic taste of disbelief upon her tongue. "As in... procure them through the conventional channels of legality?"

"Acquire," Áron corrected with another gap-toothed grin. "It is a more... nuanced term. Less likely to attract the unwelcome scrutiny of officialdom. Unlike, say, 'steal'." He nudged the pug-faced butterfly with his foot. "Besides, who'd suspect a thing with this... abomination?"

"And precisely how," Ilona inquired, her gaze returning to the bewildering cartography of subterranean passages, "do you propose we achieve this... acquisition?"

"Through the tunnels, naturally!" Ferenc exclaimed, his voice imbued with the dramatic flair of a tragic opera's final aria. He presented the pug-faced butterfly to Ilona. "A strategic undertaking worthy of Napoleon himself, albeit considerably more damp, I would surmise. We shall emerge, like phantoms from the earth's very core, directly into the baggage handling facility. A true Buda-Pestian maneuver of audacious proportions, wouldn't you agree?"

Ilona stared at the blueprints, at the remarkably unperturbed cow serenely chewing its dried apricots, at the small boy clutching his miniature mortar, and at the dusty shelves filled with the ghosts of forgotten health fads. She then looked at the pug-faced butterfly, its expression of perpetual bewilderment seeming to mirror her own.

"This," she uttered, her voice a low, clinical monotone that barely concealed a tremor of something that might have been either sheer terror or an unexpected surge of exhilaration, "is going to be... exceptionally interesting."

The subterranean schematics of this Hungarian contrarian underworld, it seemed, were about to plunge them down a rabbit hole of such dizzying improbability that even Alice, in the throes of her most fevered imaginings, could scarcely have conceived of its existence. And Dr. Ilona Varga, the pocketless pathologist whose life had taken a decidedly unexpected turn, was about to discover that her self-imposed exile was over.

The city, in its hidden depths, had decided to reclaim her, pulling her back into its chaotic, unpredictable embrace. And perhaps, just perhaps, she wouldn't have it any other way. She picked up the pug-faced butterfly one last time. "Well," she said to it, her voice a curious blend of weariness and resignation, "here we go then. Into the abyss. Try not to shed too much fur."

Sausage Squabble

By Shane Dominick

(The troubadour, in his threadbare finery, strides down the factory line, lute twanging discordantly, scroll unfurled. The old hotdog guy, grizzled and stained, leans against a meat grinder, chewing on a toothpick, a cynical smirk playing on his lips.)

Troubadour: (Singing, voice wavering) "Hark! Attend, ye weary souls, a ballad of the pink! Where dreams and meat collide, upon this factory brink!"

Old Hotdog Guy: (Spits toothpick) "Dreams? Kid, the only dreams here are nightmares about pink slime and questionable cuts. And that lute sounds like a dying cat."

Troubadour: (Scoffs) "Silence, knave! I sing of artistry, of culinary grace! Of sausage's noble journey, to fill each hungry space!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Noble? We threw a whole rubber glove in the last batch. Added 'texture', according to management. And 'hungry space'? More like 'hungry for antacids' space."

Troubadour: (Reading from scroll) "Raw materials arrive, like whispers from the night..."

Old Hotdog Guy: "Yeah, whispers of 'what's that smell?' And 'where'd that rat go?'"

Troubadour: "The flesh of beasts, alive with stories yet untold!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Stories of bein' ground up. Real page-turners."

Troubadour: "Spices of their journeys, in rich hues unfold!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Hues of 'whatever we found under the forklift'. And 'journeys'? More like 'journeys from the floor to the grinder'."

Troubadour: "A quality check—a vital gate to pass!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Yeah, Mabel's 'quality check'. If it's pink and squishy, it's good to go."

Troubadour: "Through grinding wheels of thunder, we blend with all our might!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Thunder? More like the sound of my stomach after lunch. And 'all our might' means tryin' not to lose a finger."

Troubadour: "Emulsified creation—a batter snug and fine!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Fine? It's pink goo. And 'creation'? We're creatin' a biohazard."

Troubadour: "Stuffed snugly in their casings, like secrets held so dear!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Secrets like 'what's really in this stuff?' And 'dear'? More like 'dear god, why?'"

Troubadour: "Cooking fires alight now; the fragrant smoke ascends!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Fragrant? Tastes like liquid smoke and regret. And 'ascends'? More like 'settles on your clothes, forever'."

Troubadour: "But cooling checks loom near—an eager watch we keep!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Yeah, eager to see if it's still pink. And if it'll bounce."

Troubadour: "Rejections haunt the shadows, where lost hopes may reside!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Rejections go back in the grinder. It's the circle of pink."

Troubadour: "Final checks on visions; appearance bright and bold!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Boldly pink. And boldly questionable."

Troubadour: "In packaging they nestle—dreams encased with care!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Care? We slap a sticker on it and hope for the best. And 'dreams'? More like 'dreams of a world without hotdogs'."

Troubadour: "Stored beneath the surface, where true potential hides!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Potential for food poisoning, mostly. And 'hides'? Like the 'mystery ingredients' hide."

Troubadour: "Fulfillment comes with wings, as orders come alive!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Fulfillment? The only fulfillment is when I clock out. And 'wings'? I think that's the flies."

Troubadour: "From raw embrace to final taste—a journey truly grand!"

Old Hotdog Guy: "Grand? More like 'grandly disgusting'. Now, where's my coffee? And some Pepto-Bismol?"

(The troubadour, flustered and defeated, clutches his scroll and retreats, muttering about the "barbarity of the modern age." The old hotdog guy grins, takes a swig of coffee, and resumes his vigil over the meat grinder, a king in a kingdom of pink.)

Letting It All Hang Out

By Ross Shapiro

The table, a faux-marble smear in the Bangor bistro, vaguely French, held the tiny green frog Ajax, a damp bow tie knotting his throat, a chorus of internal discord humming, a premonition of synergy twisting into a Gordian knot of doom. Qadira, the lemon shark, sat across, eyes dark, a chthonic glimmer in the dim light, an oceanic abyss contained within the frame of a salt-crusted window. Colleagues, those office-bound apostles of amphibian acquisition, had insisted. *Synergy.* A word that tasted like brine and extinction.

Escargots for Qadira, a twitching constellation of flies for Ajax, a desperate offering on the altar of interspecies accord. Qadira's gaze, a singular, predatory laser, cut through the candlelight, through the very fabric of politeness. Ajax, a fragile vessel of anxieties, felt a tectonic shift within, a peristalsis reversed, a churning vortex of existential dread. He attempted a polite excuse, a fragile utterance lost in the rising tide of internal chaos, before his entire stomach, a glistening pink sac, erupted onto the checkered tablecloth, a Jackson Pollock of digested flies and terror. Then, with a casual, almost surgical dexterity, his webbed feet, miniature instruments of cosmic absurdity, began the impossible task of scrubbing the wreckage.

Silence descended, thicker than the clam chowder lurking in the kitchen's shadowy depths, a silence that pressed down, a suffocating blanket. Qadira's gaze, now a physical force, intensified.

"We were supposed to be together," she murmured, a low, resonant hum that vibrated through Ajax's delicate eardrums, a seismic tremor in his amphibian soul.

The bistro's sound system, a malfunctioning oracle, began to play the opening bars of Paul Anka's "You Are My Destiny," off-key, tinny, a warped echo of a love song from a forgotten dimension.

A tableau of oceanic hunger and terrestrial vulnerability, a Boschian nightmare played out in the fluorescent glow of a strip-mall eatery. With a swiftness that belied her earlier stillness, Qadira engulfed Ajax, a sudden, brutal consumption that left the bored teenagers and the cook, a man with the permanent air of resignation, barely blinking. Moments later, a reverse tide, a visceral expulsion, a spasm of piscine horror. Qadira ejected Ajax, a limp, half-digested form, onto the floor, his favorite bow tie, tragically stained, a testament to the futility of sartorial elegance in the face of cosmic indifference, followed by the gruesome detritus of half-digested flies. Qadira, a creature of the deep, settled, a profound sense of fishy finality washing over her.

Kevin, the busboy, a spectral figure in the liminal space between adolescence and oblivion, discovered Ajax, miraculously alive, but profoundly un-whole, amidst the gastric wreckage. The mournful counterpoint of sirens, a symphony of urban decay, rose, a counterpoint to the fading strains of “Destiny My Are You.”
Weeks later, Ajax sat on a slightly damp vinyl chair in a quiet room at the Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center on State Street. Lukewarm chamomile tea, a palliative for the soul, was offered by well-meaning nurses, their eyes glazed with professional empathy. He tried to explain the interspecies trauma, the unsettling pronouncements of the shark, the hellish blind date, the dark, unwavering eyes, the bizarrely appropriate song, but they responded with weak “water under the bridge” puns, their minds already lost in the labyrinth of bureaucratic jargon. His colleagues, the water district denizens, offered equally hollow platitudes. He traced the floral pattern on the wallpaper, a swirling chaos of pastel hues, with a trembling digit. The world, once a predictable landscape of lily pads and juicy insects, now felt like a Dali painting gone horribly wrong, a melting clock of existential dread and predatory fish.

The hum of the faulty air conditioning, a constant, low drone, a symphony of institutional despair, held a strange, grim familiarity. This, now, was the soundtrack to his stomach-churningly surreal reality.

Waxahachie's Scale-Clothed Dream

By Wilkie Hines

The dust-devils, small and frantic,
like materialized anxieties,
swirl around his ankles,
the man with the "Give the fish Pants" sign.

Ruxandra's visions, a shimmer of scales,
and toddler denim, the faded blue
a mockery of innocence,
held against the slick, cold flanks
of the creek's inhabitants.

Szilárd's rural starkness, a sun-cracked earth,
where the catfish, the bass,
become symbols of a strange,
unsettled hunger,
a longing for a covering,
a dignity never meant for them.

Nico's quiet observation, the way
the light catches the sign's edge,
the way the man's eyes,
a watery, vacant blue,
mirror the still surface of the creek,
where the fish, in their imagined trousers,
swim in a slow, bewildered ballet.

The town's whispers, a low, humid drone,
"He's lost," they say, or "Touched,"

but he walks on, a solitary figure,
his mission, a strange, persistent pulse,
a need to clothe the un-cloth-able,
to bring a human absurdity,
to the silent, slick, underwater world.

The small pants, like tiny human ghosts,
held against the fish, in the hot Texas air.
Place the dust and dirt in the pockets,
Like failed dreams and misfortune.

© by Haca257

Hawaiian Renaissance Gone Gonzo

By Nālani Kaulana

Alright, gather 'round, braddahs and sistahs, for a tale spun from rubber chickens, musical madness, and the enduring mystery of tourist bewilderment. Down in Waianae, where chickens outnumber sunburned mainlanders, lived Da Rubber Chicken Serenaders. Uncle Kimo, convinced he was a mongoose, Aunty Leilani, channeling wisdom through pidgin haiku, and a crew as wonderfully warped as a warped ukulele neck.

One fateful day, Uncle Kimo discovered a rubber chicken, the kind that emits a squeak like a distressed mynah bird. An epiphany struck, a poi-fueled vision: the Chickenlele! They strung it with fishing line and poi container rubber bands, creating a sound that resembled a cat fight in a rusty swing set during a hurricane.

The locals? They embraced it. At luaus, the Chickenlele reigned supreme, a raw, unadulterated symphony of island life. Tourists, however, were less enthused. "Is this some form of...performance art?" they'd ask, their brows furrowed. "No, brah, dis da Chickenlele. You no like? Go back mainland," Uncle Kimo would retort.

Then, like a rogue wave crashing on Waikiki, Frank Zappa arrived. Hawaiian shirt adorned with rubber chickens, a notepad filled with chicken-scratch musical notations. He heard the Chickenlele and declared it "genius." "It's like Captain Beefheart and Don Ho had a baby, raised by feral chickens," he proclaimed.

Zappa incorporated the Chickenlele into his next album, "Rubber Chicken Serenades of the Pacific Rim," a sonic tapestry of complex rhythms, bizarre melodies, and lyrics about Spam musubi and sock-clad tourists. He added wah-wah pedals, synthesizers, and drum machines, transforming the Chickenlele's squeaks into a symphony of the surreal.

The album was a critical enigma, hailed as "avant-garde absurdity" and a "sonic assault." And then, the Grammys. Zappa, Chickenlele in hand, accepted Album of the Year, dedicating it to "the people of Hawaii and rubber chickens everywhere."

Tourists, watching the ceremony, were aghast. "This is an insult to music!" they cried. Locals, meanwhile, danced in the streets, Chickenleles in hand, celebrating their newfound musical ambassador.

Aunty Leilani, in her infinite wisdom, summed it up: "Chickenlele call / Zappa hears, like ancient drum / Grammy, he will win. / Plastic fowl sings / Tourists frown, like sour poi / Locals, happy dance."

So, the tale of the Chickenlele, a rubber chicken turned Grammy-winning instrument, reminds us: true art transcends comprehension, especially for those who wear socks with sandals. And always remember, if life hands you a rubber chicken, make some gloriously weird music, and wear sunscreen.

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